

# GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING



## Refugee Women in Canada

*Proceedings of the June 1988 Workshop*

**T**he idea for a consultation about, and run by refugee women was developed at a meeting of the National Working Group on Refugee Women which met on November 19, 1987 in Toronto. This recently-formed group was ripe for a challenge — the participants had come together out of common concerns for refugee women. All were aware of a multiplicity of problems faced by refugee women upon their arrival in Canada. All were very aware of the largely untapped skills and resources the women themselves could, under the right circumstances, bring to bear on problem identification and problem solving.

At that meeting a representative of the international NGO Working Group on Refugee Women underlined the critical need throughout the world, to collect data. Such data on refugee women could provide a stronger base for concerted actions by governments and voluntary agencies to really make a difference in the lives of refugee women.

One of the key concerns of the international group was to promote regional and local meetings of refugee women and support groups. The call went out to Canada. Luckily, we were able to respond. The Centre for Refugee Studies at York University presented a proposal to the Working Group for co-sponsorship of a research and consultation project on integration issues for refugee women in Canada. The Working Group gave its full support to the project, encouraged the YWCA to become the third co-sponsor, and the work began.

The June 1988 consultation was the first phase of that project. Phase II will develop project proposals from data provided by the June participants, and Phase III will consolidate findings and receive input from further regional consultations into grist for the mill of a major policy consultation.

The report that follows includes a general description of the planning process, and reflections on each of the five workshop

BY WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

themes written by individual participants. They used as source materials their personal insights, notes, and taped replays of proceedings. The final section contains consultation recommendations

The event provided an opportunity for the articulation of many strong and often angry feelings. They will speak for themselves. However, what might not come through so clearly was the prevailing mood of the event — empowerment. Enormous energy and enthusiasm was unleashed at the event. The vulnerabilities, strength and resilience of the women came pouring out, as did their determination to seek ways and means of being the transformer — not the helpless victim. It was a truly exciting beginning, with challenges for all of us to listen — and listen — and support!

### Planning the Workshop

After many months of talking and hoping, and after two months of very concentrated planning, a unique and important gathering of some fifty refugee women and their thirty-three children took place at Glendon Campus of York University, June 17-19, 1988.

### The Participants — Who Where They?

The women came from nine

centres in Ontario, representing the four major refugee producing regions of the world. They included convention refugee, designated class and refugee claimants. Their residence in Canada varied from three months to ten years. The women represented a wide range of vocations and professions, including teachers, health professionals, psychiatrists, research workers, doctors, childcare workers and a judge.

**Design of the Event.** In order to encourage attendance, the event was designed to enable women to bring their children. The thirty-three children who attended ranged in age from three months to seventeen years. Childcare was provided, including playpens, cribs, high chairs and strollers.

The Workshop was the first phase of a three part project jointly sponsored by the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, the Working Group on Refugee Women (Canadian Council for Refugees), and the YWCA of Metropolitan Toronto (Refugee Committee). Funding was provided by the Ontario Women's Directorate, Canada Employment and Immigration (Ontario Region), and Levi Strauss.

The overall goal of the Workshop was to identify and develop strategies and alternative solutions to the gaps or inadequacies in service to refugee women, which would facilitate their initial adaptation and on-going social, cultural and economic integration. In order to ensure a supportive climate for discussion, it was decided that workshop participants would include only the women themselves and the support team.

**Planning Priorities.** The YWCA was given the responsibility for the overall planning and implementation of the workshop. Two basic questions emerged at the outset: how to discover the experiences of women who entered Canada as refugees and to have these women reflect on the process of their settlement in Canada; and how to discover from them ways in which their settlement experience could have been improved.

In order to answer these questions it was vital to get maximum participation of refugee women in the planning process by having the Planning Committee comprised predominantly of refugee women, in addition to representatives of the three sponsoring agencies. It was also recognized that the leadership of the workshop should be in the hands of the refugee women themselves.



Afghan refugees/Ahangaran settlement

Photo: UNHCR

**The Planning Committee.** The women were recruited by the three sponsoring agencies through contacts with refugee serving agencies throughout Ontario. Meetings were held weekly from April through June at times convenient to the refugee women. The contribution of the women was particularly important in guiding the thinking and planning of the event, which resulted in greater participation of all of the refugee women in

the workshop itself. The women served as facilitators of sessions, chairing the workshop design team as well as the plenary sessions of the actual workshop.

**The Workshop.** The general framework of the workshop was planned in advance by the design team of the planning committee. The first session on Friday evening was given over to the women to determine the content and issues of concern of the total group. It was to be their workshop — this was essential for the women and for the outcome of the workshop. Graduate students at York University served as workshop recorders and translators to ensure full participation of the women. This was a very important contribution.

The major topics and priorities which emerged from the Friday evening session included: recognition; orientation; isolation; discrimination; violence and abuse.

These topics provided the basis for small group discussions on Saturday. The women drew on their life experiences to look at possible improvements in the present situation, and proposed solutions. Each group addressed the elements of most concern to them. Each topic was sub-categorized; for example, recognition as a human being, gender recognition and professional recognition. Lack of recognition was attributed in some cases to discrimination and in others to "cultural abuse."

Saturday evening provided time for relaxation. The children were completely involved. The entertainment was a highlight, featuring South African Gumboot Dancers with their music and

dance based on the struggle for liberation in South Africa. The dancers identified with the women and the women with the dancers. In spite of the festive atmosphere, there were some tears and strong emotions as women shared their stories with one another.

**The Closing Plenary.** The Sunday closing plenary addressed solutions and creative ideas for strategies for change. Many ideas were generated to help guide the research phase of the project and to provide the participants and sponsoring groups with possible follow-up activities for the future.

The Workshop was timely. The women were ready and prepared to participate in this creative process. The sessions were long and there was little free time — but no one missed a session. After the day was over, spontaneous groups formed to build a network of their geographical and cultural groups.

**Finale.** The Workshop finale on Sunday afternoon was only the beginning. The women had found mutual support in each other and they wanted to keep in touch.

All agreed that the weekend was a great success. Much was shared and learned and a great sense of solidarity was created.

There was a genuine desire for action and commitment. The women's involvement has continued in the preparation of the report. Several of the women are already active in mutual support activities — not to mention the children who met and have become friends!

The essence of the women's reaction at the workshop can be summed up in the few words of a refugee woman, who spoke for the entire group when she said: "Consider us — not only as we are now, but also as we were. Consider us — as we can become, our potential as individuals and in enabling others."

## ORIENTATION

For refugees coming from varying cultural traditions and pre-arrival experiences which are often traumatic, the prospect of adapting to a new life in Canada was seen as confusing, frustrating — and sometimes even humiliating. Confusion and frustration were seen as arising out of the barriers erected by existing policies and practices:

"Everything is changing... what can I say to help other new refugees. I can't say anything to help."

"My experience can never be helpful for her. If I say how I was helped three years ago, she might find out it is different and then may think that I am lying."

Some women present at the workshop brought up the need for both ethno-specific and more centralized social service agencies to help refugees. For them, because of their pre-arrival experience, it may be easier to have confidence in an agency not associated with their home country:

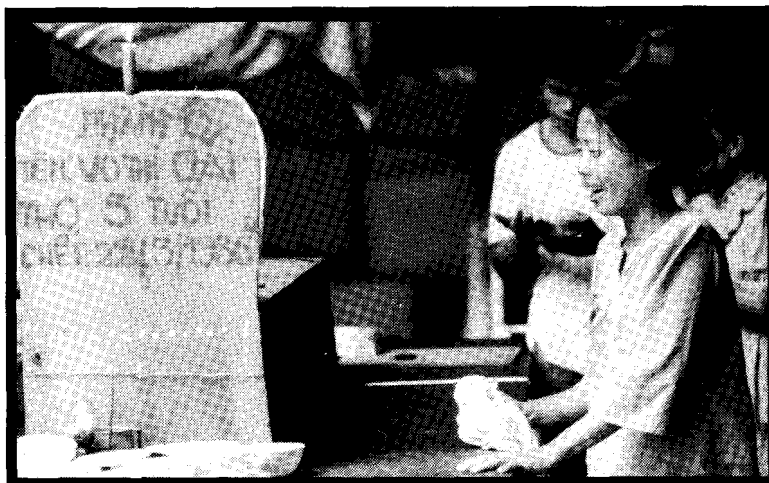
"The officer asked us what group we wanted to get in touch with — a church group, our own community group or a Canadian, non-governmental agency. We said 'Please we do not want to join any group. We are running away from the dangers of being associated with one particular group.'"

Moreover, the women repeatedly expressed the need for government to take a more receptive and responsible role in providing services to refugees:

"When we came we thought it will be the government that would be providing all services to the refugees."

In addition lack of information about existing services was also pointed out:

"If I know where to seek help if I am treated unjustly at work, I will be able to get help. If I don't know it, what can I do?"



South China Sea/Boat People

Photo: UNHCR

There was also a sense of futility connected with waiting for legal redress:

"The law is not strong. It takes too long to lodge a complaint and file a case. When it takes too long, you say, 'Okay, let me forget it — it is not good.'"

Immigration officers and other government personnel in general were seen to be lacking in cultural awareness or even in a sympathetic approach to the plight of refugees:

"Instead of treating our wounds they added salt to it."

Throughout the discussions the women participants also expressed their opinion that orientation should be a two-way process. The onus should be not only on the refugee or refugee child to understand and adapt to the new culture. But people — especially refugee workers, teachers and government personnel — should try to understand the refugee as well:

"We can't clap with one hand; if we do, nothing happens. If we clap with both hands, then we got the sound. Just as Cambodian children are encouraged to mix with Canadian children and learn about their culture, Canadian children, too should be encouraged to mix with Cambodian children and understand their culture."

The experience of being a complete stranger creates a state of cognitive uncertainty and anxiety within the refugee with respect to the appropriateness of her behaviour in various social situations:

"My daughter came home from school and told me: 'When I open my lunchbox the other children laugh, because it looks so different.'"

When the women were asked how they handle such a situation, their response was:

"So next time you don't take the same food. Or you hide yourself and feel you are not part of the community."

Another woman went further and said that totally adapting to the food habits of the settlement country, without critically reviewing it, can result in disaster. As she regretfully admitted: "My son is a junk-food eater now."

felt that, if they try to go directly into Canadian society, one can be so disappointed or rejected that it can hinder the whole process of orientation and adaptation. One woman shared her experiences of constructively using the hard times she had:

"The hard times helped me to grow. I have been here six years and I had many hard times."

But many women seemed to think that there was a real need to be part of supportive groups within their own community to aid them in adapting to a new life:

"When you are alone it is difficult. Being new and not having support can make it more difficult for a refugee. You need support, especially at the beginning."

The opportunity to meet and share experiences was seen as therapeutic:

"We need to talk among ourselves — maybe not to take it to the

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Leading from this discussion, the need for constructive criticism of the new culture to which the refugee is exposed was seen as a necessary exercise. Many women expressed the need for teachers and other children at school to be 'introduced' to the refugee children in a culturally sensitive way. Refugee parents may have difficulty dealing with teachers because of discrimination and language barriers.

They also expressed a sense of being humiliated by immigration officers, service agency personnel, and even by the teachers at the school:

"In my country I had a family, a job and a background. In Canada I have nothing."

In attempting to explore the usefulness of forming solidarity groups within each refugee community and among different refugee communities, the reactions were varied:

"It is good and yet it can be not so good."

They explained that, if the refugee women formed support groups within their own community, they can end up being a minority group and never part of the mainstream. But they also

government level, but to share, solve problems inside us. Like this I think the children too need time to meet and share among themselves."

## DISCRIMINATION

**Who might be discriminated against?** Anybody could be discriminated against, but it is mostly refugees and immigrants who are damaged by discrimination. Still, the difference between immigrants and refugees who both could be discriminated against in the same ways, is that a refugee who comes to save her life is carrying plenty of depression, frustration and pressures because of the situation she has been through in her homeland. So a refugee who escapes her country has no image of the new country she is entering. She is also frightened of being deported or not being accepted in the new country. So we have to recognize and determine these differences.

**Discrimination on Arrival.** Unfortunately, discrimination can start right away at the immigration office, where the authorities are expected to be familiar with and understanding of the situation of refugees:

"I never forgot the first day I went to the immigration office

in Montreal. After travelling a few days and waiting in the line in Immigration office, I and my three year-old daughter were feeling very tired and nervous. An immigration officer called my name. In the first glance I could read the resentment she had in her eyes. She started asking my identification. As soon as I started to speak, she shouted rudely that she could not understand what I was talking about. I was just shocked, as I was sure I could speak enough English to reply to her questions, and I even did not need a translator in the airport and nobody had a problem of understanding me. Besides that, the way she was pretending she could not understand me was so humiliating that I wished I had stayed in my country and been killed, but not humiliated that way. By the way, I asked for a translator.

I explained that my husband had been executed and I was threatened with being arrested or killed and that was the reasons I left my country. She screamed again saying I did not have to leave the country and some other sentences that I was so anxious that I could not hear her words. My mind was not working. I did not know what I could do. I was afraid of

returned to ask when there might be a vacant apartment. I noticed a woman sitting and filling an application. I recognized then that he rejected me because of my black colour."

#### **Discrimination in Evaluating the Educational Documents.**

There is discrimination in evaluating the education documents. Women from some countries are accepted in higher levels of the educational system, because they do not belong to the Third World:

"I was shocked when the Ministry of Education evaluated my Masters Degree equal to only two years of university in Canada. I think because they put my country into a Third World country category. Unlike here, not everybody is qualified to get into university. We have a limited number of universities, and have to pass difficult tests, so the selected students are the most serious and desirable ones. I even found out, although the subjects I was studying in my homeland were in my mother tongue, the subjects here are easier to study."

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reacting against her, as I thought she may make the immigration office deport me back. In fact, it even crossed my mind that being deported and killed was better than standing that humiliation. The only thought that frightened me about deportation was my daughter. I just wondered if that immigration officer was a human!! This treatment affected me deeply and made me feel I was not accepted to this country, and I had depression for months."

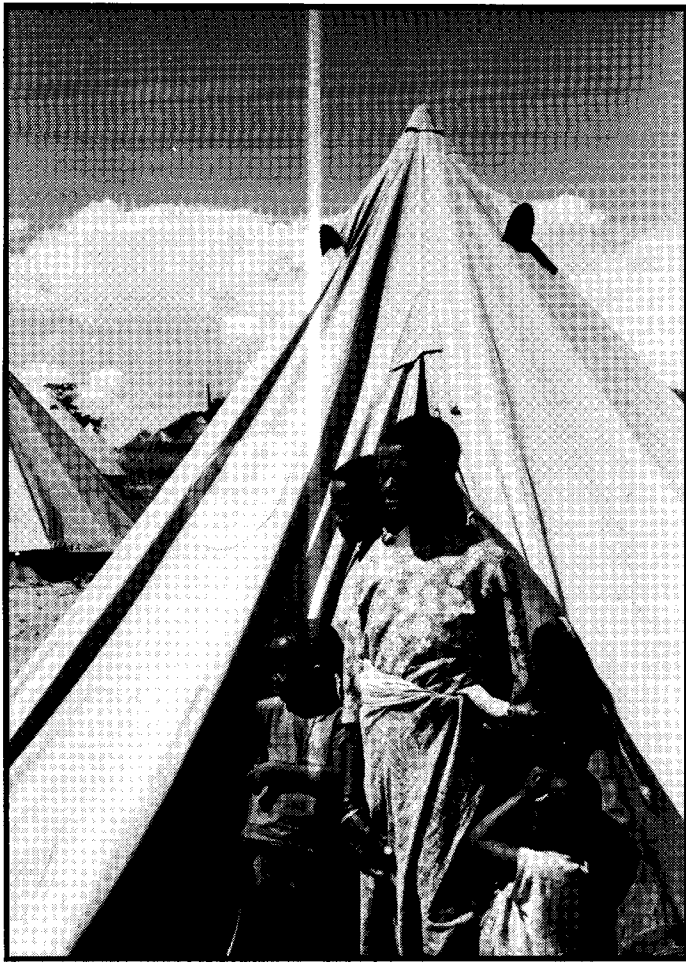
**Discrimination in Renting a Place.** Anybody who enters a new country must find a place to live. This is another step where we encounter problems. There is discrimination in renting a place, such as having a refugee status. The landlords do not rent their houses or apartments if they find out we are refugees. Colour, race, nationality, language, low income, not having a good savings account, the number of children, and sometimes even religion, make them discriminate against us:

"I was looking hard for an apartment. I was living in shelters for two months and I had to leave the shelter. I knew that there was a building with a few vacant apartments, but when I asked the superintendent to give me an application, he claimed he had nothing available. I left the building, but after a few minutes I

**Discrimination in Jobs.** Refugees are not able to have jobs related to their skills or professional experience. It is because of status, colour, nationality, language, race, etc. The excuse of employers is that refugees do not have Canadian experience. Some of the women have been studying for years in university and have worked for years in their skilled or professional area:

"Now we must leave out all these years and start from zero. We even sometimes prefer to work in our own chosen professions for very low wages because we are afraid of forgetting our skills."

"I phoned a factory and explained about my ten years experience and my education in electrical engineering. The person in charge made an appointment. I was very glad that for the first time they did not apologize that they had already engaged somebody, as I knew it was not true. How could they employ someone only hours after that newspaper was issued? I knew the apologies were because of my accent and my language. I went for the interview. I showed all my papers and education documents. The personnel manager seemed quite impressed by my papers. So everything was fine. He did not mind employing a person of a different colour or nationality. Finally



Mozambican refugees/Nyangombe camp

Photo: UNHCR

he asked me about my status, and I showed him my immigration papers. In one second his face changed and he gave me back the papers and said that they would call me the day after. I knew it was because of my status, and he would not call me. I was right. He never phoned."

**Discrimination Against our Children.** Many refugee children are discriminated against in the schools by teachers, staff and other children. For instance, the children call them names. They are humiliated because of their clothes, colour, language, food and cultures. Unfortunately, sometimes even the teachers humiliate the children because they are not able to pick up everything fast because of the English language. Their defense of their culture and not believing in Canadian customs, is another cause of humiliation:

"Everyday my son was bringing back his lunch and pretending he was not hungry. When I made him tell me the real reason, he said it was because his lunch was different and other kids made fun of that."

Another mother says that her daughter did not want to go to school because other kids called her names. She could not make any friends because her English was not perfect.

**Discrimination in Society.** We are facing discrimination everywhere: on the bus, in the workplace, in the supermarket,

banks, offices, in the schools, and in most every aspect of our daily life. We are suffering. How could we feel we belong to a society that is humiliating us?

"One day I was in the supermarket with one of my friends and talking to her in my language. A lady who seemed Canadian shouted: 'Stop that funny language!' I told her, 'It is funny because you don't understand.'"

We believe that knowledge about other cultures — and especially about refugees — is very low. The media is responsible for informing the people we are here because of the dangerous situation we had in our home country. We are not here to grab jobs. We may even create jobs: an owner of a big factory said he would not build his factory in Canada if there were not so many refugees or immigrants. We pay taxes to help the government, too. Canadians should realize that we are not here to save money, but to save our lives. As human beings they should understand. One problem is that the media is quiet and does not seem to be interested in giving a good impression of refugees. We hope one day all the people all over the world understand the refugee situation.

## RECOGNITION

At the workshop, recognition emerged as a priority issue for most of the refugee women. There was a definite sense that refugees, and refugee women in particular, need and should be recognized in areas of work experience, professional skills, employability and opportunity, education, language ability and, most of all, as human beings.

**Need for Recognition of the Previous Life Experiences.** Some people ask why there is a need for such recognition. It is because refugee women have lost everything. They feel they do not belong. They feel isolated. They have lost the emotional support that they would have had from their community at home. They have lost support from their relatives who have died or who have been left behind. To ask them to forget all they had before, to ask them to start over as if nothing ever happened, is not right.

On their arrival in this country, the immigration officials and the public expect them to forget whatever they were doing before and start a new life. The refugee women thought that this was unfair and uncaring. Before coming to Canada, the refugees sign a paper to the effect that they are willing to work at anything when they come to Canada. When peoples lives are in danger, they will sign any papers just to get themselves to a safe place. They do not have a choice.

There were women from many different parts of the world and they all felt that, after arriving in Canada, they were not worth anything. If they talked about their education or previous professions, they were ridiculed. One woman said that she was asked by an official in the Ministry of Education whether her university degree was the equivalent of grade twelve or thirteen.

Another woman, who was teaching mathematics for several years in her country, was refused permission to teach in Ontario and was told to take some additional courses which the official could not even name. Some women were shocked to learn that degrees, diplomas and certificates are evaluated differently



depending on the country of origin!

The women felt that there is obviously something missing in the system. There is no mechanism to effectively identify, tap and utilize the experience and knowledge that refugees bring with them.

In spite of the ever increasing shortage of nurses and teachers, the many experienced refugee nurses and teachers are either forced to go through the three or four year Canadian courses or leave their profession and work at factory jobs. The women felt that they were being pushed by government policies and practices into anything other than what they were doing before. The counsellors encourage refugee women to change to non-traditional jobs (such as truck driving, or wood working) and the government will willingly sponsor these women to change their professions. Some women believe these are unjustifiable policies to protect the Canadian professionals from newcomers:

“Canada is a large country. There is enough room for the newcomers to help in their professional fields, even if they have to start at the bottom of the ladder.”

**Lack of Public Awareness.** The participants expressed deep concerns that the public appear to have very little knowledge about refugees. Usually their sources of information are TV, radio and newspapers. Many people are so uninformed that they claim refugees, on the one hand, abuse the welfare system and, on the other hand, take all the jobs. They even claim they are responsible for the housing crisis, as well as responsible for the many crimes committed in the country. With recognition will come the realization that refugees do not take up all the jobs in the country, that they do not create the critical housing shortage, or rely on welfare. Refugees are grateful to be here; they need to be understood, they want to work, plan their future, and lead a normal life.

## VIOLENCE

Violence was defined as deliberate hurt caused by an individual or a group to another individual or group. Violence could take the form of verbal, physical or emotional abuse. Even harassment, coercion and manipulation were seen as different forms of violence. Violence, the women who participated said could “happen anywhere — at home, work or in school.”

At home, the change in cultural norms between countries in terms of women’s role and financial problems in the new country contributed to the incidence of violence:

“Economic situation here push women also to work. In our culture the women stay at home and look after the home and children. So here when women go out to work our men are not happy with that.”

“My husband blames me if there isn’t any money. If he is depressed as a refugee, if he can not get a job.”

Very often verbal abuse leads to physical violence directed at the wife or children:

“My husband loses control when he gets angry and breaks the



Laotian refugees/Ban Vinai camp

Photo: UNHCR

glassware in the house. He once almost dropped a jar of pickles on my son’s head.”

Psychological and social adjustment in the new country provoke tensions in the family relationships. Many women expressed their feeling that family violence and breakdown of relationships were linked to the life under stress in the country of resettlement:

“Me and my husband were married for five years. We never had these problems back home.”

“This is not our problem only. It’s not us. It is something to do with life here. You are more pressured here.”

Social and economic dependence, coupled with cultural traditions, make it necessary for the problem of violence at home to be approached in a culturally sensitive manner:

“In our culture we have married or divorced people. We do not have people who just separate.”

At work, refugee women also become victims of violence due to gender differences, lack of information about rights, and fear of losing their job:

“Sometimes we are forced to work on Sundays. You know when an order has to be finished. You have some special thing

to do on Sunday, but you can't do it."

"My sister's boss showed the magazine *Playboy*, and said that he can pay us to do like this with him. He showed us some pictures. We were frightened to tell anyone, as he was the boss."

At school, the cultural pressure that refugee children experience was seen as a kind of emotional violence. The women seemed to think that this was due to the lack of sensitive awareness among other children and the teachers. Very often children come face-to-face with abuse, harassment and verbal violence which are subtle in the classroom, in the playground or on the streets:

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—

"Get off the Street."

"You ching-chong chu go back."

"Your food looks like shit."

One student said "they said go back to your country. It hurts badly because you know you can't go back."

The mothers also felt that the other parents were not being fair, or teaching their children to be fair. "When the children of Canadians pick a fight with refugee children, their parents say, 'Don't touch my child.'"

Throughout the discussions, the women expressed the need for more attention to prevention of violence, rather than treatment of victims of violence:

"When things are going to happen, when you sense it's going to come any day now. We need some organization where we could seek advice and guidance."

"It is difficult for us women to handle abuse and violence at home. We need prevention programs in place too."

Prevention requires that social workers and others working with victims of violence (or would be victims of violence) to be trained adequately and appropriately:

"We need people to help us understand what's happening to us, to analyze our problems. There are many broken families because we don't have nobody — nobody trained and qualified

to help us help ourselves."

Cultural restraints were also seen as hindering seeking help or accessing services:

"It is very difficult for a woman to seek professional help and say my husband is beating me up."

"It is harder for a man to admit that he needs help. Traditionally, he is supposed to be stronger, the one who can solve problems."

Finally, isolation was seen as a condition leading to abuse and violence. With the change in cultures, refugee women can become more isolated due to the loss of extended family and community, and their lack of communication skills in the country of resettlement:

"Back home if my husband beats me some elderly, important person will speak to him and advise him. He knows that he can't just beat me and get away with it. Here we have nobody."

## ISOLATION

Nowadays, in Western industrial societies, isolation and alienation are common aspects of day-to-day life. This becomes a more complex question for a refugee woman who enters a new country.

At the refugee woman's conference many aspects of this issue were discussed. Both isolation and alienation from the main streams of society were recognized as great difficulties facing refugee women. A refugee woman who comes to Canada faces this problem in its full strength. The following elements are amongst many that the refugee woman faces:

**Language.** Most refugee women who come to Canada do not know enough English to run their daily lives. Considering the linguistic background of these women should allow them time to familiarize themselves with their new language in particular and their lives on the whole. These women are not only facing a new language, but they are struggling to survive on a daily basis. As a result of this constant battle, they are engaged for long hours in running a household, as well as in adapting themselves to the Canadian environment.

These women are supposedly becoming part of this society; yet far from it they desperately need an English-speaking third party to represent them in their various engagements. Interpreters are not always easy to find. Sometimes personality conflicts and different points of view occur between the refugees and their interpreter and this makes the problem of expressing themselves more complex.

**The Housing Problem.** The first contact with Canadian society a refugee woman has is in finding shelter. Especially in Toronto, the housing shortage has created a dilemma. The refugee women concluded they had to wait months to find an apartment, and even this was after paying handsome fees to real estate agents. The emotional and physical pressure was intensified for single women or women with children.



**Separation for Families and Friends.** As soon as a refugee woman comes to Canada, she realizes she has to cope with all her problems single-handedly. Many of these women come from Third World countries where families and friends have extended and close relationships. Many of their problems in their original countries would have been solved with group efforts by family members. The feelings of loneliness become more obvious when they have children and have to hold a job. They must rely upon daycare and, in the case of illness, have to leave their job to look after a sick child.

These women sometimes end up in isolation, loneliness and gradual withdrawal. They are unable to express themselves clearly in English and to establish sufficient contact with their new environment. This unfortunate situation in many cases results in depression or even mental disturbances. Sometimes the pressure can lead to violence amongst family members.

**Finding a Suitable Job.** Although a refugee woman might have valuable work skills, she would not have an equal opportunity in the job market. Lack of linguistic proficiency deprives her of getting a job suited to her qualifications and training. These circumstances push her to settle for any available job in order to survive. Lack of knowledge about different channels and organizations leaves her defenseless to obtain a justified recognition.

Most Canadian employers ask for Canadian working experience, and yet are reluctant to be the first to hire her and offer her the opportunity to obtain this experience.

Many women who have education and previous work experiences in their native land were forced to settle for minimal, unrelated jobs and, as a result, they have been deprived of joining in with their social and professional groups. All this has left them more isolated, discouraged and demoralized.

**Facing a Different Culture and Tradition.** Refugee women — especially women who come from Muslim and Third World countries — face cultural shock. It is very difficult for these women to accustom themselves to all the rights and privileges that Canadian women enjoy. Most refugee women in their original countries have lived under male-dominated societies which leave them very little self-esteem and personal interest. When they come to Canada, the exposure to new cultures enlightens and confuses them at the same time. They feel lonely and unsupported. They neither want to lose their families, nor can they afford to live under the old rules.

Many of the participating women in the conference complained that their husbands would not want to see them work outside the home, yet economic pressure have made them to do so and this has caused more tensions in the family.

**A Lack of Understanding of Canadian People and Organizations for Refugees.** One of the widely-discussed subjects during the conference was the lack of acquaintance by Canadian society with the reasons people seek refuge in a different country. Being a refugee in a new country, for most of these women, means a lot of confusion and no sense of belonging:

“When we have crossed over a broken bridge with no hopes to return, we are heart broken and dejected.”

These feelings are enforced when the refugee women are not warmly received in Canada and can't express their problems and their grief. People lack an understanding of the political and social structures of refugee-producing countries. When they confront a refugee woman, they are not sympathetic. Canadians usually are astonished, and find refugee stories incredible. The refugee women felt they are not accepted and, alongside with other problems, they become more withdrawn and isolated.

**Class Differentiation.** The financial assistance a refugee woman receives from the government is hardly enough to cover her basic needs. When she enters the work force, she has to settle for low-paying jobs; thus her status does not improve. When she, and especially her children, compare themselves to the rest of Ca-

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nadian society, they are demoralized by their low standards of living and, as a result, they are further isolated from the rest of society.

**Lack of Information about Social Agencies and Organizations.** A refugee woman is often not informed about these organizations when she enters Canada. There could also be some ethnic community organizations which can be helpful in various ways. The majority of refugee women do not find out about these channels and try to solve all their problems single-handedly.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### General Recommendations

1. Information emanating from this conference be shared with all agencies dealing with refugees, particularly those involved in refugee settlement.
2. The creation of an “Organization of Refugee Women” for the sharing of knowledge, experience and information exchange. The organization would welcome new refugee women as they arrive in Canada and thus facilitate their settlement. Furthermore, the organization will provide mutual support for the participants through a truly empowering process.
3. Immigration officials be invited to participate in Phase III of this project.
4. The system for refugee settlement be changed as follows: give women equal financial responsibility; produce two

identification cards so that either husband or wife can receive benefits; provide equal access to services for both husband and wife (language training, employment, etc.); improve delivery of financial assistance (reduce visits to government offices and long waiting periods).

5. The creation of more agencies that can provide services to address the specific needs of refugee women [as in the case of N.E.W.(New Experiences for Refugee Women) in Toronto].
6. The development of a "Newsletter" with information from the various refugee groups. Furthermore, that as an outcome of this weekend workshop, a newsletter be developed with issues and programs for refugee women.
7. Refugee be provided with a booklet (available in many different languages) with information on basic needs, such as food, housing, OHIP, education, stores, ethnic press, books, social services, community centres, etc.
8. Basic information about Canada be provided BEFORE refugees arrive in Canada. This could be handled in conjunction with the UNHCR or an other international agency.
9. Provisions be made for the dissemination of information and delivery of services to refugees who are illiterate in their own languages.
10. A "public education" campaign be carried out (perhaps through the media, the educational system, etc.) to provide real reasons why refugees are forced to flee their countries and come to Canada. This, we believe, would promote greater understanding, tolerance and acceptance.
11. The example of the North York Board of Education Multicultural Program in which each child is assigned a counselor who speaks his/her language to review educational history, and later to evaluate progress, should be implemented in other school boards and areas.
12. Employers of agencies that deal with refugees, such as Employment and Immigration Canada, receive educational courses, including cross-cultural training, so that they become more sensitive to the realities and needs of refugees, particularly refugee women and children.
13. Better coordination between Immigration departments and officials overseas and in Canada to avoid unnecessary delays at the airport.
14. The establishment of an ombudsman office/centre which could handle refugee complaints about mistreatment and discriminatory practices.
15. English classes be made available to all refugee women (with the corresponding childcare provisions when applicable), given the negative impact that the inability to speak the language has on refugee women's settlement.
16. A full revision of the ESL (English as a Second Language Program). This must include access to refugee women, relevance of contents, criteria for selection and placement, variances on program length, etc.
17. The practice of being required to sign a document giving up the right to work in one's own profession be discontinued.
18. Due to the great impact on the life of a refugee, it is recommended that the time that refugees must wait for the granting of status be shortened.
19. Refugee resource persons should actively participate with Government for the purpose of dealing with critical issues of

refugee settlement.

### **Recommendations Concerning Orientation**

1. More information is needed about legal rights, particularly regarding housing and employment.
2. There is a need to develop a two-way educational process: refugees need to learn about Canadian society, and refugees must inform Canadians about their countries of origin, their heritage. For the latter it is recommended that the use of newspapers (letters to the editor) be utilized, and that social service agencies broaden their network to the refugee community to allow information-sharing with school teachers, ESL instructors, lawyers, doctors, etc.
3. When the use of interpreters is required, it is recommended that the interpreters receive adequate training, particularly where linguistic differences (based on class, education, etc.) within the same language exist.
4. The quality of available translation services must be examined. Interpreters need to have technical knowledge and skills to do the jobs. They must ideally be from the refugee's own country.
5. Refugees should receive, at point of entry, information that can facilitate their settlement, including language needs, contact with their own communities, information about the climate, food, etc.
6. The establishment of proper linkages between refugee newcomers and members of their communities who are already here.
7. Translation and orientation services be made available upon arrival in Canada. These services must be delivered by a person from the refugee's ethnic, national or language background. These personnel should have "official" recognition from both the government (payment for services) and from the refugee community or ethnic group.
8. Pre-arrival orientation for both refugee (in their own language) and government officials.
9. The provision of orientation training, sensitivity and cross-cultural communication training for receiving groups, immigration officials, social services personnel, private sponsors, etc.
10. Pamphlets about different countries, distributed by Employment and Immigration, be reviewed and re-written to give a more in-depth image of countries and refugees.
11. ESL classes should be used as a vehicle for orientation purposes. Content must be much more relevant to the needs of refugees and newcomers in general.
12. A local agency, run by refugees, should be set up to provide information to newcomers. This will facilitate communication.

### **Recommendations Concerning Discrimination**

1. More and better media coverage of refugees' various cultures to increase awareness of refugees on the part of Canadians. The image presented in the mass media and common stereotypes of refugees as helpless individuals, dependent on social assistance and unable to take charge of their own lives, must be changed.
2. Children be adequately assessed when entering Canada's educational system, and intervention of parents in children's schooling problems be facilitated to ensure proper identification.

cation of the child's needs.

3. The use of school testing for refugee children be changed to one more culturally sensitive. The results of these tests should not be used to stream children who are still in culture shock from the refugee experience.
4. Some sensitivity be used when refugee children are integrated into the school system to help promote cross-cultural understanding and create a better image of refugees.
5. Discrimination by landlords against refugees with children, in receipt of government's financial assistance, and in need of housing, be stopped.
6. There should be prompt resolution to the legal status of refugees to eliminate discriminatory practices (in employment, housing, education, etc.) that occur against refugees whose status is not defined.
7. That colour, race and countries of origin should not be barriers to access to education, employment, housing, etc.
8. A different identification coding system for refugees be considered, since the Present "9" social insurance system carries the possibility of discrimination built right into it.
9. Housing services for refugees be evaluated. These services are highly inadequate at present.
10. The expansion of Affirmative Action programs to include more people from different cultures in the work setting. A quota system may be desirable.

#### **Recommendations Concerning Recognition**

1. Refugees' previous work, education training and life experiences be recognized, as they may be relevant to the Canadian context.
2. Canada Employment counsellors should be sensitized to value and recognize refugees' past training and experience.
3. More multi-cultural content in the educational system. Refugee parents could be involved in some classroom activities (for example as speakers, in presenting audio-visual materials, and in working on specific projects).
4. Refugees who have a professional background be guided to serve their own communities, and perhaps to do volunteer work in the related fields, as a way of familiarization with Canadian practices.
5. Refugees be given training courses which will allow them to validate previous knowledge and experience.
6. Refugee women be given access to language classes and/or upgrading courses so that they can express themselves, acquire a sense of self-worth, capabilities, etc. To this end, access to child care services is essential.
7. Refugee women should be provided with information and mechanisms that allow them to choose closer contact with the community that they feel most comfortable with.
8. Canada Employment Centres should play a major role in providing information about refugees' various communities and different agencies and services.
9. Refugee women want to be recognized as individuals who have come to this country with something to offer: strengths, skills and, more importantly, "a motivation to grow."
10. That on-the-job training or the re-training option be connected to past knowledge, skills and experience whenever this becomes necessary. This includes language training.
11. Alternative assessment methods be developed to evaluate past, education, knowledge and experience of refugees who

do not have access to their credentials.

12. Public education must include both positive and negative images of our countries of origin.
13. Refugees must make use of every possible opportunity at public speaking: this can increase awareness of the refugee situation.
14. Refugees must seek work and educational opportunities that allow them to acquire knowledge of their own fields. This could include volunteer activities.

#### **Recommendations Concerning Violence**

1. We recommend more culturally-sensitive counselling for men and women to deal with the issue of domestic violence.
2. The prevention of violence should be the highest priority, since refugee women are vulnerable to sexual and physical assault. Some organizations should be set up to deal specifically with preventative measures.
3. The creation of refugee women's groups and also refugee men's groups to meet with one another or together to discuss feelings and attitudes around changing roles and adjustment to Canadian society.
4. Shelters for women affected by violence must be properly staffed and should provide a culturally-sensitive environment for when they become the women's only option.

#### **Recommendations Concerning Isolation**

1. Refugee women should be given information about places to go to when facing crisis situations.
2. The establishment of refugee women's groups would be quite useful. This would encourage women to participate: however, there is a need to go to their homes first.
3. The use of alternate media to provide information to refugee women who live in isolation.
4. Information must be provided (delivered and phased) in such a way that it can be easily understood and accepted. Forms are often intimidating.
5. Refugee women need to establish appropriate linkages within their own communities. Friends from the same community can often take the place of the extended family. Contact with individuals who speak the same language and can identify with one's culture must be facilitated.
6. Information, methods and procedures for refugee women's sponsorship of family members be facilitated, given the important role that the lack of emotional support plays in isolation.
7. Opportunities should be created so that refugee women can share their life experiences with Canadians to increase mutual understanding.
8. Support services could be set up for refugee women who are single parents (for example, childcare during shopping).
9. There should be "universal" access to language training for all refugee women, since the inability to speak the language is identified as one of the major sources of isolation.
10. Refugees — particularly women — need to organize themselves within their own communities to combat isolation.
11. Refugee women need to be provided with more opportunities to get together and to share — the way it is being done this weekend.